



Podcast Transcript: Program Evaluation

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Olani Lilly: Today we're going to be talking about evaluation. We've been doing this summer series on how to start a Native American Language Immersion School and we are very honored to have Joan LaFrance here evaluation. Welcome, Joan.

Joan LaFrance: Hello, welcome to Seattle. Happy to join you.

Olani Lilly: Thank you. So could you please tell us a little bit about your work and what experiences you have with program evaluation?

Joan LaFrance: Well, I have a firm, it's called Mikinaak Consulting and Mikinaak is the Chippewa word for Turtle. And I'm a member of the Turtle Mountain Band Chippewa, so that's behind my decision to name my firm Neckinac Consulting. I did a lot of work in basically program development, program administration. And one day I was told that we were going to have an external evaluator walk in and evaluate what we were doing. That's when I worked for United Indians of All Tribes Foundation on curriculum development. And when I heard that, I wasn't very happy. I only had reactions that were evaluator, judgment. I just didn't care for it at all. However, the young man who came in and did the evaluation left me with so much information and so much help that at that point I was thinking of going back to graduate school and I raised my hand and said I wanted to do it. And so I went back and eventually got all the credentials that I needed. I specialize mostly in evaluating in Indian Country. I do have some that take me out into Micronesia, some projects, but they're Indigenous-based. And the focus of most of my work is turned out to be in the tribal colleges over the years. And to that association, I worked with the American Indian Tribal College Consortium, AIHEC. We built initially a training program based on a manual we found called the Indigenous Evaluation Framework. So I basically use that to guide my work and program evaluation.

Olani Lilly: Awesome. Well, the next question I wanted to ask you is your thoughts on what the purpose of evaluation is.

Joan LaFrance: Well, I think a lot of people have that reaction I initially had. You hear evaluation and you think judgment. But that is far from the purpose of a good evaluation. It's about learning. And, the purpose of evaluation is to learn from what you're doing.

Olani Lilly: Yeah.



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Joan LaFrance: And that's what I learned from that being evaluated in a program that I was running, which is involved in curriculum development, and I have no background in the field. But his observation and his information, one validated that we were doing a good job, but he gave me a lot of information from the children. So, evaluation is about learning. It's about telling your story. And taking time to reflect on that story so that you are learning.

Olani Lilly: When you are working with Indigenous communities and going into Indigenous communities are there different perspectives or strategies that you use within those communities or programs?

Joan LaFrance: Yes. I would say they are not ones that you learn when you take a course on how to do evaluation. The first thing is proper protocol. We all know that it's kind of an ironic tension, I'd call it. Evaluators are trained to ask a lot of questions. And the first thing that you really don't want to do, I think, as a part of proper protocol is come into a community and have your expertise stamped across your face, and you start asking a lot questions. So I think the first thing that's different is you've got to honor protocol. You've got to enter the right way, respectfully, and oftentimes it's a challenge to find a way to have conversation and not just question after question. And bringing small gifts, sharing your own background, and leading them to talk about their story.

Olani Lilly: Yeah, that's awesome. How can evaluation support emerging schools and programs?

Joan LaFrance: Well since evaluation is about learning and reflection, it can do a lot of good, because it gives you a chance as a program director, as staff, as participants, to think about what's going on. And to think about it in what we call evaluative thinking. A reflection that looks at, well, gee, what works?

Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Joan LaFrance: What isn't working very well? What can we try that might address some things we're not happy with? So, it's a great help because it just helps you think about and reflect on what you're doing and what you might do differently. Or, to reward yourself or your staff and your program for what's working and celebrating that.

Olani Lilly: Awesome. So, can you provide some examples of what next steps might look like once you've completed an evaluation?

Joan LaFrance: Yeah, well the very sad thing is oftentimes, the next step is a written report and filed away to the federal funder or to the foundation that's funding and that's it. So, I think the next step has to be incorporated in what the first step is.

Olani Lilly: Mm.

Joan LaFrance: That is a real question about why do you want to do evaluation? Is it basically to satisfy an external resource request that you do it? And that's the only reason you're doing it? And I



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guess the next step is to file that evaluation, check it off on your checklist and go on. But if your first step is to actually own the idea that you might gain from this evaluation. After it is done, your next step is to think about what you learned and how you want that to have influence on your program. Evaluation alone is not going to change the program, but it can influence what's going on in the program. And that influence can be very, very positive.

Olani Lilly: Mm.

Joan LaFrance: You kind of take stock and think about it and reflect and learn and apply learning. When I was first introduced to the staff, I was introduced as “our evaluator” and I mean, it just put up a clear message as to what the program director thought.

Olani Lilly: Right.

Joan LaFrance: Over the year as I would visit, and I have a time to interview her for collecting data. She leans back one day, and she says, “I really like it when you come to visit.” Because it takes time for me to think about what I'm doing.

Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Joan LaFrance: I have an opportunity to reflect on it. You write a report but oftentimes your influence is in the process of getting people to think about and reflect on what they're doing.

Olani Lilly: Yeah, yeah, I can relate to that. I remember several times, you know, you get so inundated by the day-to-day challenges and work that needs to happen in order to run a school. So, to take time to really have a conversation and reflect is great. I mean, it just, it helps you, you know, sort of think through maybe next steps and have somebody to talk to about what you're facing and then be able to reflect back maybe the next steps that you could take or what you could do better. So that really resonates with me. What are the missteps that you've seen in evaluation?

Joan LaFrance: Well, we've alluded to, I think, what one of the main ones here is that you check it off on your checklist and you submit that as a report, and that's it. So, the most common mistake is to think about evaluation as this requirement. You're going to do it, and you do it, and then that's it. You don't take the time to understand it. I think another real common misunderstanding is to think about it as a time for people to come in and judge you rather than seeing it as your opportunity to learn. I think that's a common mistake. I've oftentimes asked people if we could kind of nix that word because there's so much baggage in that word. It's a time for storytelling. And good Indian stories have lessons in them.

Olani Lilly: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, with that said, and you know, like you're saying, don't make it, don't let it just be about fulfilling an outside requirement. Do you have any suggestions on how to embed evaluation into sort of the daily running of your program or your school?



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Joan LaFrance: Well, if we think about evaluation as reflection, you can't reflect daily because you're doing.

Olani Lilly: Right.

Joan LaFrance: But I would take your schedule and look at it and learn how to have a meeting at least quarterly or semi-annually, where your purpose is to reflect. Not to plan the next month's activity. It's to reflect. And build it into the schedule. It is something that you can do with your evaluator. Somebody can facilitate that reflection. But build it into the schedule. And in a way that allows you to continue to be very, very busy but to take a breath. And make it a time where you can feel like you're laying down implementation. And you're going to pick up your cup of coffee and look at reflection.

Olani Lilly: Who do you think should be engaged in that process of evaluation? How do you determine who should be at the table, you know, sort of reflecting and how best to engage them in that reflection?

Joan LaFrance: Well, I think that, you know, you want to look at engagement in continuance. It's like, who do you engage? Is it just that? Or do you go down and engage more of your participants, an advisory committee, your board, your school? And ideally, an Indigenous evaluation, we would like to make sure that in that reflection we're including the community that we're serving. Looking at a representative or two that doesn't feel overwhelmed by the fact. A lone parent might not be ready to walk but you might want two or three. But you want to look at how it is that you can get that participatory element in there. And you may not need to do that every time that you reflect but if you can that would be ideal because their voice is one that you need to hear.

Olani Lilly: What advice would you give a school that is wanting to conduct an evaluation?

Joan LaFrance: Well, if you're going to hire an evaluator then my advice is to be cautious in that process. Look for people who have experience in Indian country and understand the idea of protocol. And, if you're doing it internally, which you can do. If your organization is located within a larger organization, a tribal authority or a school district, there might be within that a person that you can hire internally or work with internally. So, you have to make a decision. Is this an external evaluation or are we using somebody internal?

Olani Lilly: Right. Awesome. So that's a great segue to the next question. When you're looking to hire an evaluator, you know, what are some of things you should consider when you are searching for the right fit?

Joan LaFrance: The level of comfort you have with the person, the ability of the person to be a listener. We tend to be good talkers. The openness of the person to just spend time with you and your program before the, that's all part of the evaluation, but before the thing that feels like evaluation.



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Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Joan LaFrance: They'll come to a parent meeting as a observer. And I don't like that word, but that's out of the lingo. But as it gets. So, they can take time to see people in their own comfort. I've often said, you know, one of the great ways is to join any kind of lunch. Usually, you can pay for a meal, and you can sit down and chat. I think we're very welcoming as Indigenous people. So take that time to allow that welcoming to happen. And, so that's some advice I would give. Try not to be your only entrée. It's just your official title of the evaluation.

Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Joan LaFrance: You're also a person with your own backstory, your own reasons for why you became an evaluator, your own relatives and family, and figuring out how you're related at all. You know that kind of entree is important.

Olani Lilly: Yeah, what I hear you saying is that, like, that relationship building from the beginning is crucial for working within Native communities. I mean, not just Native, but I mean, it's definitely a good practice wherever you go is to build that relationship. What advice would you give someone for working with an evaluator?

Joan LaFrance: First of all, be clear about why you want this evaluation, and that goes back to are you checking off that requirement? Be aware that evaluators are not there judging, so you have to be open to the idea that you're going to learn. And that this process is important to the growth of your organization. And then I would say, obviously you want somebody who knows what they're doing. They understand evaluation, they have a level of experience, and you want to see what that experience is. And fundamental to that is that experience in Indian country. You want to be sure that they are aware of the way you make that entree, the protocols.

Olani Lilly: Yeah. That leads me to another question. What are some of the pieces of work that I should be looking for in their proposal or when they are talking to me about the work they are doing? Are there standard evaluation chunks of work or scope of work that I should be looking for when I'm trying to select an evaluator?

Joan LaFrance: Well, I think there are two things. One, we mentioned proposal. So, if the proposal looks like they know evaluation. You know, well we'll use this process to collect data. This is how we will analyze that data. This is the report process. In the proposal, and then references, you get an idea of their basic competency and understanding of evaluation.

Olani Lilly: Right.

Joan LaFrance: But it is in the talk story time, in the interview that you need to get an idea of their understanding of how you enter an Indian community as an outsider. And you get an idea of of what



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kind of comfort level you have with them. I do believe that staff and directors can be good gatekeepers. So, is it somebody you feel comfortable entering the gate?

Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Joan LaFrance: Just from your own experience. I've worked with colleagues by virtue of this being assigned to an organization, where I felt like I had to be a gatekeeper so that they would not be. You know, lovely as they were, they just were a person when they met somebody who was full of questions.

Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Joan LaFrance: And didn't understand. You know, sometimes people go through a lot of education and are not out of an Indian community, just like to have that airtime. And so, you know, people like that are not good candidates. [I look for] people who have shown me that they know how to tell you who they are without just naming their credentials.

Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Olani Lilly: Is there any other advice you'd like to give to our participants as it relates to evaluation or working with an evaluator or the process of evaluation? Things we should look for, best practices, and maybe some practices we should steer away from. Any other advice?

Joan LaFrance: Thinking about what kind of organization are you? Are you an organization that values what I call evaluative thinking or organizational growth? And that is an internal conversation.

Olani Lilly: Yeah.

Joan LaFrance: That is where you weigh, we are an organization that values reflection and taking time to use that reflection to influence what we're going to do. So first of all, get your own headset thinking about why and what evaluation is for you. And then you think about how that evaluation will be done. And obviously an external evaluator is important. I've done some training in tribal colleges on how to do evaluation, but the truth of the matter is, our organizations are not full of a lot of resources that we have time to put a new job in front of people who are already doing work. So the answer is, you're probably going to go outside. So once you're committed to the fact that you want to learn from the foundation. When you go outside, take that time to see if you find a person with that ability to be a storyteller with you, and observes the proper protocol for entering into your community. And have what you can tell is experience and a background. Those are the kind of things you want to look for. Somebody you feel comfortable bringing into the community.

Olani Lilly: Great. So, is there anything else that we didn't cover that you'd like to share?

Joan LaFrance: I would like to go back to that idea of, can we find a different word? Evaluation, especially in a situation where it's education, is so much connected to grading, and to passing a



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judgment. My main advice is just to get that idea of judgment out of the thinking when you think about evaluation. In fact, we don't often times have clear translation for evaluation in the language. But, you know, we think about it in terms of learning. I would advise people to take that time before you start evaluation to think about how you feel with that word, how you feel comfortable with the idea of reflection, and how committed are you to growing as a staff? Put yourselves in that mindset, organizationally, and then partner. Rather than bringing an external evaluator, partnering with your evaluator.

Olani Lilly: Yeah, awesome. Thank you so much for sharing your information, your knowledge, your experience. We really appreciate it. Thank you.

Joan LaFrance: Thank you. I would encourage people to, if you want to look at the Indigenous Evaluation Framework, that's on the portal of the American Evaluation Association.

Olani Lilly: Yes.

Joan LaFrance: They changed their website, so it's a little bit difficult to find it.

Olani Lilly: We'll make sure to include that URL in the podcast so people can access that framework. Thank you for that.

Olani Lilly: This is a wrap on our podcast number six. Again, we really appreciate you sharing your experience, your expertise, as well as your time. Have a wonderful day, everyone.